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SUBJECT: PAKISTAN EARTHQUAKE: A VISIT TO BATTGRAM

11. (C) Forward Operating Base Mansehra Officer-in-Charge and Econoffs visited Battgram district on November 5. Settlement patterns have complicated relief as damage is spread across mountain villages with low population densities. Interlocutors were concerned for villages in the Allai tehsil, many of which have been established at high elevations and would become isolated by winter snow beginning in 15 to 20 days. The Pakistan military is encouraging the relocation of these villages to a relief camp established at Meira on November 2. Military officials aim to resettle 40,000 to 50,000 people. Around 2500 have arrived with approximately 50 families (average size of 8-10 people) coming to the camp daily. Uncertainty persists as to the number who will eventually resettle in Meira, as many may choose to remain in their mountain villages. Police and military officials reported that some landlords were instructing tenant farmers not to leave their allotted land on threat of eviction. Approximately 30% of the mountain population is estimated to be in this situation.

12. (C) The Pakistan military established the Meira camp adjacent to an earlier facility constructed by the al-Rashid Trust (a Department of Treasury designated person of interest for sanctions purposes), a frequently observed pattern in both Mansehra and Battgram districts. According to camp supervisor LTC Farz, the military has informed al-Rashid that it will be taking over the al-Rashid facility on November 6. Al-Rashid has reportedly accepted the decision.

13. (SBU) Political parties and their affiliated relief organizations were much in evidence. Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) through both its al-Khidmat charitable trust and its student-wing Islami Jamaat Talaba (IJT) is the most visible. Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam Fazlur Rehman's (JUI-F's) al-Khair trust has a much smaller presence despite its reported domination of the Battgram political scene. Local officials claimed that neither the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) nor the Awami National Party (ANP) were present in relief efforts. Surprisingly, the Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM), which has no political base in Battgram, had established one fairly large relief camp in the district.

14. (C) Unlike in neighboring Mansehra District, Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JUD - the parent organization of the designated foreign terrorist organization Lashkar-e-Tayyaba) was not visibly present in Battgram. The Battgram city police commander told OIC that he had strict orders to prevent JUD or any banned organization from taking part in relief efforts. His forces have already prevented JUD from establishing an adjunct relief camp to their tent village across the district border in Mansehra.

15. (SBU) The Battgram district administration was criticized for failure to engage in relief operations. The local police chief claimed the mayor, a wealthy landowner elected with JUI-F and PML support had "fled" the district to Islamabad after accusations of selling donated relief goods. The military reported better coordination at the thesil and union council level. Individual relief coordination commissions for each thesil and union council had been formed consisting of military officials, the elected union and thesil nazims, and their defeated opponents from the 2007 election. The military reported excellent cooperation in determining relief priorities and missions through this system, which it intended to continue through reconstruction.

16. (C) Comment: The Balakot relief experience is clearly a mixed bag. Uncertainty over villagers' intentions during the upcoming winter have made comprehensive planning virtually impossible. The district government's inability to engage on relief operations has forced the military to develop a work around involving other levels of local government. While cumbersome in its operation, the new system does seem to involve local leaders in planning and could prove valuable in reconstruction. JUD's exclusion from Battgram is welcome, although the proliferation of relief camps to match the dispersed nature of the population may well allow them to operate without detection.

17. (U) Embassy Islamabad is transmitting this cable on behalf of FOB Mansehra.

